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Press may be barred from military action

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Reporters probably will not be included in future military actions if the circumstances surrounding that action are identical to the U.S.-led invasion of Grenada Oct. 25, a Defense Department spokesman said yesterday.

Assistant Secretary Michael Burch quickly added, however, that such circumstances were unlikely to recur and added the military would prefer to include the press corps in its operations if field commanders could have assurances that reporters would not pose a threat to the success of the mission.

Mr. Burch and a number of other witnesses testified before the Citizen's Choice National Commission on a Free and Responsible Media, an organization affiliated with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which is holding public hearings on the role of the media in society.

Asked by the commission why reporters were not permitted on the Caribbean island until two days after the invasion, Mr. Burch and White House communications aide David Gergen said the administration feared inclusion of the press would result in

greater casualties and a possible hostage situation with the American students on the island.

The officials said the difficulties of accommodating television crews also contributed to the decision not to allow any reporters to cover the invasion.

Edward Fouhy of ABC and Jack Nelson of the Los Angeles Times, who also testified, charged, however, that the decision to ban the media was a political rather than a military decision and part of the administration's effort to isolate itself from the media.

The Citizen's Choice commission had chosen to look at the Grenada question as part of its exploration of foreign news coverage by the nation's media.

Former CIA Director Stansfield Turner told the commission a lot of foreign reporting suffers from reporters delving into insignificant details while ignoring the larger implications of the event.

For example, in relation to the shooting down of U.S. jets in Lebanon, he said reporters should be asking, "Why were we flying there?" rather than raising questions about the age or speed of the planes or the combat experience of their pilots.